



# The Diffusion of Contention in Contemporary China: An Investigation of the 2014-2015 Wave of Teacher Strikes

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## Abstract

- The article examines a wave of teachers' strikes that spread across China during the fall, winter and spring of 2014-2015.
- Looking at event data and social media coverage of the wave, it discusses how social media enabled protesters to carry out media-savvy campaigns that involved both online and offline tactics, draw inspiration from claimants in faraway protest sites, and emulate tactics, slogans and symbols from other locations.
- The episode indicates that claimants in contemporary China are utilizing new media to break the geographic bounds of localized protests, and while falling short of nationally coordinated protest movements, are able to generate widespread, cross-regional protest waves that place greater pressure on subnational authorities to give in to protester demands.
- These cross-regional protest waves present a third category of "widespread" protests in China that are distinct from parochial/localized protests and national protest movements.



October 8 Demonstration in Henan, Yongcheng  
Credit: Weibo.com

## Design

- The project investigates the current state of popular contention in China by looking at the case of the 2014-2015 teachers' strike, which originated in central China, before rapidly spreading into the Northeast, Southeast and Southwest parts of the country.
- It applies the *China Labor Bulletin's* strike map dataset (2011-2015), which derives data on specific labor actions from English and Chinese language news sources as well as social media, to explore the tactics, demands, estimated number of participants, and temporal-spatial placement of protest incidents.
- This data is supplemented with an investigation of additional news reports and social media postings by protest participants as well as interviews with experts on social unrest in China during the summer of 2015.

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## Findings

- The eight-month wave of contention, which stretched across 19 provinces, autonomous regions and provincial-level municipalities and included 91 separate incidents, suggests that in China's increasingly dynamic, information environment where even parochial protests can rapidly diffuse across the country, the binary modes of contention frequently applied in research: parochial and national, need to be supplemented with a third variant of protest: the "widespread" protest.
- Widespread protests resemble parochial protests in that they target local officials and are oriented around material, group-specific grievances.
- But instead of remaining restricted to one location, widespread protests diffuse across provincial boundaries, allowing claimants in unconnected sites to adopt tactics, symbols and other material from initiating sites as they seek redress for similar grievances in their own localities.
- Unlike national protest movements, diffusion across communities does not necessarily involve direct coordination or brokerage between connected sites.
- Rather, in the case of the 2014-15 teachers' strike, the wave was characterized by nonrelational diffusion, in which claimants broadcast their actions on the Internet and the media, inspiring similarly aggrieved claimants in other communities to emulate their actions.
- Data derived from media reports revealed an unprecedented surge of contentious collective action among teachers during the fall, winter and spring of 2014-2015, as well as commonalities among geographically dispersed protesters in terms of demands and tactics.
- These developments suggest that unrest that previously remained localized increasingly has the ability to rapidly diffuse geographically in China's digitally-connected society.



November 24-26 Demonstration in Heilongjiang, Harbin. Credit: Boxun News